

34 The Story of Leprosy



When the bubonic plague first occurred in San Francisco in 1900, the official response was to isolate, or quarantine (KWOR-un-teen), Chinatown. By 1906, it was clear that quarantine would not work to stop a disease spread by fleas. But during that first outbreak, people living in Chinatown were left to fend for themselves.

Leprosy (LEH-pruh-see), or Hansen's disease, is another illness that caused people to be quarantined. Because this is a long-term disease, people infected were forced to live apart from others for many years. In this activity, you will read about leprosy and make decisions about how people with leprosy and other infectious diseases should be treated.

CHALLENGE

How should people with infectious diseases be treated?

PROCEDURE

1. Read the story of leprosy. As you read, think about how infectious diseases can and should be controlled.
2. Discuss Analysis Questions 1 and 2 with your group.

THE STORY OF LEPROSY

Imagine having a disease that, if people knew you had it, would cause you to be taken away from your family and forced to live somewhere else. If you had this disease, other people would be afraid to come near you or touch you. You would not be allowed to eat or sleep near uninfected people.

This is the story of leprosy. Historically, people with leprosy have been expelled from society. In the Middle Ages, people who had leprosy were considered dead. They were given a funeral service while still alive, and then forced to wander, without a home, and beg for food until they died. People have always been afraid of those with leprosy because the disease could cause serious deformities of the face, arms, and legs. Nerve damage could cause skin numbness. People sometimes lost fingers and toes to injuries that they did not feel. Damage to optic nerves could lead to blindness. In addition, there were often sores on the skin. Many of these changes were permanent and left those infected physically disabled.

In 1894, the Louisiana Leper Home was established in Carville, Louisiana. At that time, people infected with leprosy were not allowed on public transportation and were taken to the Home by boat. In fact, some individuals were placed in handcuffs and leg shackles so they would not escape. Once there, they were not allowed to make telephone calls or vote. Fear of spreading the disease meant that their outgoing mail and money were sterilized. The local soft drink company would not even accept empty bottles from the Home.

In 1873, Dr. G. A. Hansen discovered that the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae* caused leprosy. However, no one knew how to prevent the bacteria from spreading. It was not until the late 1950s that the use of antibiotics against leprosy finally allowed people infected with the disease in the United States to choose where they wanted to live. Today, leprosy is called Hansen's disease in honor of Dr. Hansen. This new name also reflects the modern attitude toward this disease. It is now possible to treat and cure Hansen's disease with drugs. An infected person can become non-contagious after just a few days of treatment, and the spread of the disease can be controlled without long-term isolation of the victims.

The irony is that Hansen's disease does not spread easily and is very hard to catch. Only about 5% of family members living with infected people develop the disease. The exact way this disease spreads is still

not known. Scientists believe that becoming infected requires close contact with an infected person over a long period of time. However, it has always been rare even for people caring for those with Hansen's disease to catch it. This may be because more than 90% of the population is believed to be immune; this means that these people would not become infected even after being exposed to the disease.

Although it is now rare in the United States, Hansen's disease is still a serious health problem in parts of Asia, Africa, and South America (particularly Brazil), where it usually affects the poorest people. Despite advances in its treatment, more than one new case of Hansen's disease is diagnosed worldwide each minute.

EXTENSION



Go to the SALI page of the SEPUP website to link to sites with more information about the history of leprosy in the United States.

ANALYSIS



1. How have people with Hansen's disease been treated throughout history? Provide specific examples.



2. Imagine that you meet someone who tells you that he or she has Hansen's disease. How would you respond? Support your answer with evidence from the activity.



3. Discuss what factors should determine how a person with an infectious disease should be treated.



4. Based on your understanding of infectious diseases, explain whether you think people who have an infectious disease should be quarantined. Support your answer with evidence and identify the trade-offs of your decision.

Hint: To write a complete answer, first state your opinion. Provide two or more pieces of evidence that support your opinion. Then consider all sides of the issue and identify the trade-offs of your decision.

5. **Reflection:** In Activities 30, 32, and 33, you considered how to prevent the spread of infectious disease. Imagine that you were infected with an infectious disease. Would you volunteer to be quarantined? Explain.